



The nature of institutional heteronormativity in primary schools and practice-based responses

Renée DePalma^{a,*}, Elizabeth Atkinson^b

^a University of Vigo, Facultade de Ciencias da Educación, Campus Universitario As Lagoas s/n, 32004 Ourense, Spain

^b University of Sunderland Centre for Equalities and Social Justice, Faculty of Education and Society Forster Building, Chester Road, Sunderland, SR1 3SD, UK

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ABSTRACT

Concern for school-based homophobia is increasing, yet there is a tendency to focus on individual incidents of homophobic bullying rather than the cultural and institutional factors supporting them. We analyse ways in which institutional heteronormativity operates in primary schools and report results from our research in UK schools that culminated in a Participatory Action Research project in which practicing teachers explored possibilities for disrupting dominant discourses of sexuality and gender expression. We argue that policy and practice need to be reconceptualised to recognise institutional heteronormativity and to interrogate the discourses underpinning systematic forms of oppression.

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The need to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)¹ equality in the current equalities agenda is demonstrated by research in a variety of different national contexts. In the UK, research has shown that almost two-thirds of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people surveyed had experienced direct homophobic bullying, while nearly all of them had heard derogatory language (Stonewall, 2007, p. 151). A recent study of trans youth found that 64% of trans men and 44% of trans women were bullied or harassed in school for not conforming to gender expectations (Whittle, Turner, & Al-Alami, 2007). In the US, the National Mental Health Association (2005) asserts that while four out of five young LGBT people surveyed could not identify a single supportive adult in their schools, those that did identify adult support tended to report that they felt a sense of belonging in the school. An Australian study linked the heteronormative environment in schools with depression, self-harm, and dropping out for LGBT pupils (Dyson et al., 2003). Research in Canada found that 40% of homeless youth identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and that the vast majority of those interviewed remembered their school experience in strongly negative terms (deCastell & Jenson, 2002). Studies have investigated how heteronormative school practices

exclude those who threaten the assumption of universal heterosexuality in places as diverse as Brazil (Moita-Lopes, 2006), Canada (Dalley & Campbell, 2006), Spain (Lanaspa & Galán, 2006) and the US (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Of course, these school attitudes are conditioned by broader society, and heterosexuality and gender normativity have been expected and enforced throughout history and across the globe. While same-sex sexual acts were decriminalized in England and Wales in 1967 and throughout all US states by Supreme Court decision in 2003, these acts are punishable by up to 20 years imprisonment in Malaysia and can be punished by death in seven countries. Gender non-conformity is often conflated with sexual orientation, yet can be specifically regulated by legislation as well; for example, Kuwait specifically criminalizes people 'who imitate the appearance of the opposite sex' (Amnesty International, 2008). Some countries have banned the promotion of LGBT equalities, specifically in school contexts: Lithuania, for example, which decriminalized homosexuality in 1993, passed legislation banning schools and the media from promoting "violence, suicide and homosexuality" (Smith, 2009). A similar resolution in Poland in 2007 failed, largely due to pressure from Amnesty International and the European Union (Amnesty International, 2008). It's important to recognise that despite unsupportive national contexts, activists have continued to fight so that basic human rights are extended to LGBT people, as evidenced by officially-banned Slavic Gay Pride marches in Moscow in 2009 and Minsk in 2010 (International Day Against Homophobia, 2010). While institutionalized oppression is by no means limited to school contexts,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 627844992.

E-mail address: renee@uvigo.es (R. DePalma).

¹ We use the commonly recognised acronym 'LGBT' here for convenience, although it is important to point out that this can serve to essentialise identities and exclude some lived experiences.

education can provide a starting point for recognising and challenging it.

1. From homophobia and transphobia to heteronormativity and sexism

School-based homophobia has been an increasing concern in many national contexts. In 2008 every primary and secondary school principal in Victoria, Canada received educational guidance entitled *Supporting Sexual Diversity in Schools* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008). The alarmingly high incidence of suicide among LGBT youth has inspired Suicide Prevention Australia to urge the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) to develop a whole school approach to homophobia and transphobia modelled after the Victoria guidance (Suicide Prevention Australia, 2009). Like Australia and Canada, the US lacks national policy and guidance, although California's AB 537 ensures that 'public schools have a duty to protect students from discrimination and/or harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity' (California Department of Education, 2009). While the European Union cannot directly determine school policy in member states, it has included homophobia as an equalities area to be addressed in schools; 'trends such as increased violence, radicalism or fundamentalism in society, and expressions of racism, xenophobia, homophobia and sexism are inevitably also reflected in school communities; bullying is a problem that several Member States have identified as a priority for action' (European Commission on Education and Training, 2009). In the UK, 'sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying' is addressed in the most recent set of anti-bullying guidelines established at the national level by the Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCSF) (2009).

There is some recognition in these documents that homophobia and transphobia are not limited to LGBT people, but can affect anyone, including those with lesbian and gay parents and anyone who does not conform to gender stereotypes. However, homophobic bullying continues to be cast as a particular problem rather than as a systematic institutional manifestation of cultural bias, and this can leave room for institutional oppression on the grounds of sex, gender and sexuality. The recent amendment to the UK's Children, Schools and Families Bill to permit faith schools to teach that homosexuality is wrong (Williams, 2010) illustrates just such a conceptual schizophrenia: how can schools address homophobic bullying if they are simultaneously supporting homophobia? These kinds of conceptual inconsistencies in legislation and policy protecting LGBT people are not unique to British education, as exemplified by the fact that non-publicly funded institutions in Australia may fire teachers with impunity on the grounds of sexual orientation (Ferfolja, 2008), the uneven US state legislation about same-sex marriage and civil partnerships (Amnesty International USA, 2010), and the refusal of a Boston Catholic school to accept a child with lesbian parents, despite the fact that Massachusetts was the first US state to legalize gay marriage in 2004 (Lindsay, 2010).

While it is certainly a significant accomplishment that the UK has national school-based guidance on 'sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying', there remains a tendency in both practice and guidance to focus on individual incidents of homophobic bullying rather than understanding the cultural and institutional factors supporting them. This approach to homophobia contrasts with the more sophisticated approaches to racism in the UK that started with the law enforcement system and has greatly influenced other institutions, including education. In response to a brutal racially-motivated murder in London in 1993, The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry defined institutional racism as 'the collective failure of an

organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin (Macpherson, 1999).

This understanding of institutional racism has inspired the police force to recognise racism as an institutional process. While we don't by any means argue that the police force has been successful in eradicating racism within its ranks (Pilkington, 2004), we do argue that the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry has led to a conceptual shift that has not yet been applied to anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia work in schools (Sanders, 2008). Rather than focus on effective responses to incidents of homophobic bullying, schools need to examine ways in which everyday school practices, such as gendered school uniforms, school records listing 'mother' and 'father' and the persistent lack of representation of lesbian, gay and non-gender-conforming people in curriculum materials constitute institutional heteronormativity and sexism. These kinds of investigations have also taken place at the secondary level, for example, in terms of the enforcement of gendered uniform policies in American schools (Green, 2010), the exclusion of gay and lesbian relationships in both formal and informal aspects of German schooling (Timmermanns, 2007), the enduring prejudices and violence against young LGBT people in South African schools despite constitutionally protected rights (Betteridge & van Dijk, 2007).

Heteronormativity can be defined as the 'organizational structures in schools that support heterosexuality as normal and anything else as deviant' (Donelson & Rogers, 2004, p. 128). Homophobia emerges from heteronormative cultural contexts, but school-based interventions focusing on challenging 'homophobic bullying' fail to grasp the broader cultural context of heteronormativity. Carrera, in her study of Spanish secondary pupils, concluded that the classic perception of bullying fails to adequately account for school bullying cultures "that take the form of games or jokes and are normalized as age-typical behaviours", and that these need to be addressed as everyday acts of sex/gender/sexuality construction (Carrera, 2010, p. 755, my translation from the Spanish). Swedish research suggests that violence against perceived homosexuals is enacted as a means of gender construction (Knutagard, 2005). Yet bullying discourse constructs certain groups of people as 'at risk' and tends to marginalise them by locating the 'problem' within the individual rather than within normalising social structures. This opens up the possibility of 'blame-the-victim' responses that suggest that victims might eliminate or at least reduce the problem by dressing or behaving differently (Broverman, 2008; Hill, 2004).

Some of our own work in primary schools has shown that children learn homophobia and transphobia at a very early age: 'gay' can mean anything that is ugly or doesn't work properly, that gay and lesbian family members are best kept secret, that there are 'boy' activities and 'girl' activities, and that two boys might kiss each other, but only if one of them is wearing a dress (see Allan et al., 2008 for more detail on this last observation). Our observations of how children reproduce narrow, stereotypical cultural understandings of sexuality and gender in primary school settings have been supported by research in various cultural contexts (Blaise, 2005; Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993). In order to analyse how heteronormativity is discursively constructed we draw upon Butler's understanding of a heterosexual matrix to further explain the socially constructed conflation of sex/gender/sexuality underpinning these processes, 'For bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender...that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality' (1990, p. 151).

These processes can be seen to operate when our assumptions are disrupted, as in the recent highly publicized case of a pregnant

man in Australia. Mr. Beatie, a trans man, deliberately declined the sex reassignment surgery that would have rendered him unable to carry a child and has recently become pregnant for a second time after a successful first delivery. Although Beatie is legally recognised as a man and legally married to a woman, he reports that friends, relatives and even health care professionals have refused to recognise his gender (for more details, see the full article in *Pink News*, and also note the inverted commas around the word ‘man’: “Pregnant ‘man’ will give birth to second baby,” 2008). Beatie’s situation operates as an important test case for examining our fundamental assumptions about what constitutes a man and a woman. Furthermore, we have encountered primary school children who were familiar with this high-profile case, illustrating that the popular media ensures that children are grappling with sex and gender, as well as sexuality, whether we address these issues in school or not.

2. Investigating heteronormativity as a cultural phenomenon

From 2004 to 2008 we conducted research to find out more about the ways in which heteronormativity is supported within and beyond schools through discursive practices: not only through what is said, but through silences, inferences and assumptions. We were not interested in contributing to the already considerable research base demonstrating the extent and effects of homophobia, but rather we aimed to more fully understand the nature of heteronormativity as a cultural phenomenon. We conducted extensive interviews with practicing and prospective primary teachers and designed a series of web-based discussions around a set of questions we provided about addressing homophobia and promoting sexualities equality in primary schools. Using discourse analysis techniques, we found some striking patterns which helped us not only to understand the nature of popular discourses around sexuality and childhood, but to consider what might be necessary in terms of policy and practice to challenge these assumptions. While the results of this earlier research have been published elsewhere (see Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; DePalma & Atkinson, 2006, 2007, 2009b for further methodological details and specific findings), we will briefly describe here how some of the key findings highlight the operation of institutionalized heteronormativity within and beyond school settings.

We found that teachers and non-teachers alike tended to assume that parents would disapprove of activities such as using picture books that depicted gay and lesbian headed families. There was a related assumption that LGBT issues were both unrelated to and irrelevant to children’s lived experiences. These assumptions of course are supported by the reluctance of LGBT parents to make their presence known in schools and the tendency for LGBT teachers to conceal these aspects of their ‘private’ life for fear of adverse reactions. Some teachers who identified as gay or lesbian felt that their jobs might be in jeopardy if they came out, suggesting that they were unaware of legal protections and/or understandably suspicious that school leaders could easily subvert these regulations. It seems that legal protection is not necessarily enough to protect teachers from a hostile school environment; it wasn’t until February of 2008 that a UK teacher successfully invoked Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, which makes it illegal for employers to discriminate on the basis of perceived or actual sexual orientation. The fact that this was lauded as a test case 5 years after the regulations came into force highlights the reluctance of teachers to take on this kind of discrimination².

Our research revealed a prevalent assumption, even among participants who identified as LGBT, that straight and gender normative people don’t ever ‘come out’, in the sense of self-identifying in relation to their sexuality and gender. However, our data revealed the many ways in which these people are actually constantly coming out in schools, unconsciously (re) asserting their majority status through small clues: the casual and unrestrained use of pronouns, stories and photos of partners, etc. In contrast, we found that what was construed as a simple lack of action for LGBT people (‘not coming out’) actually required a carefully constructed system of strategic silences, half-truths and direct lies that seemed to demand a great deal of attention and planning. Only one respondent seemed to explicitly notice the many ways in which her straight colleagues came out constantly about their sexuality, and she suggested that the best solution was for everyone to dissimulate:

I maintain that all my straight (staff members) who work for me are actually making gay peoples’ lives harder...every time they talk about a male (partner), if they’re female...and vice versa...I think everybody should be in the closet (laughter). No, seriously, if everybody (used the term) ‘partner,’ if you took off your wedding ring, etc., than actually that would be a step forward.

We don’t agree that the best solution is for everyone to go into the closet, but this teacher’s observations are significant: every time someone casually talks about what they did with their ‘husband’ or ‘girlfriend’ at the weekend, the heteronormative assumption is strengthened and those who do not fit it are rendered less and less visible. Based on what people told us, it might seem as if LGBT people suddenly come into existence after finishing primary school (or even secondary school), never have children, and certainly don’t become teachers.

The fact that many of the people we interviewed identified as lesbian and gay teachers and/or parents and that many described uncomfortable primary school histories based on an awareness of their own sexuality suggest that this absence is a socially constructed, rather than actual, one. Responses of lesbian and gay teachers revealed a need to hide non-heterosexuality in school environments rife with overt or covert harassment; in such atmospheres even threatening to reveal one’s sexuality can be a weapon when that sexuality is construed as deviant and dangerous to children (Ferfolja, 2010). This socially constructed absence operates as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy: social processes that assume the absence of marginalised people contribute to this marginalisation by forcing them into the very self-regulated invisibility that is read as absence.

In this environment of socially constructed absence, it becomes difficult for teachers, regardless of their own sexuality, to challenge perceptions of the (apparently) absent ‘Other’. As Nixon argues, ‘doing teacher in such a way as to undermine the current homophobic pupil lexicon invokes the same positioning response as imposed on pupils’ (2010, p. 149). We found that while many teachers reported that they were willing to respond to homophobic bullying, such as reacting to homophobic language, very few were willing to engage in curriculum-based work. Again, there was a general fear that parents would disapprove of ‘promoting’ homosexuality on religious or moral grounds, and that these grounds would be seen as legitimate. One teacher neatly contrasted her confidence in dealing with (hypothetical) racist parents with her fear of homophobic parents:

I wouldn’t be the least worried if I had a child with (racist) parents in my class who had decided to have a black character in [a] story [they were writing]. I would happily talk to those parents and defend the work we were doing and direct them towards my head teacher if they weren’t happy. This ought to be

² Details are available on the National Union of Teachers (NUT) website: <http://www.nut.org.uk/story.php?id=4231>.

no different but it does feel different because our thinking about sexualities is not yet in line with our thinking about race.

Many, like this teacher, felt that their schools would not support sexualities equality work in the same way as they would other, more established, equalities work. Teachers have a harder time with sexualities equality than with other equalities areas because non-heterosexuality has been constructed as hyper-sexual at the same time that sex has been constructed as irrelevant, or even dangerous, knowledge for children. This phenomenon seems be international in scope; LGBT activist and scholar Eric Rofes draws on his US-based teaching experience to remind us that our silence about sex and sexuality is itself a loud and clear message for children, 'As teachers, we all teach a great deal about sex, whether we acknowledge it or not. What we say and what we do not say, what is voiced and what is silenced create knowledges for our students with tremendous ramifications' (2005, p. 118).

Curran argues that such a meaningful silence reigns as well in his Australian primary teacher training course, where "outrage and the need for censorship for children around women's bodies and lesbian and gay 'lifestyles' predominate" (Curran, Chiarolli, & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2009, p. 156). In the words of a Canadian 11-year old child of a lesbian couple, "At my school, when a kid says ('lesbian') in front of a teacher, the teacher says, 'Don't say that word' or something, like it's a bad thing...it shouldn't be something not to talk about" (Killoran & Jimenez, 2007, p. 23). Many of the teachers we interviewed noted the irony that while schools maintain silence around sexuality, broader society is practically screaming constantly about sex; for example:

Sex happens in your bedroom behind closed doors, that is sort of the implication. And in fact it doesn't always. It spills over into every facet of life. You know, you walk down the street and you see the billboards. Sex is there.

These international understandings that the silence about sexuality in schools is unintentionally and powerfully meaningful were reflected throughout our teacher interviews in the UK. As one head teacher put it:

...that's probably why, one of the reasons we should do it...to give primary children kind of tools to understand that they are turning into sexual beings. And OK, it might not happen this very minute, or next week, but it is going to happen. And especially girls at primary school, you know, they're going through normal changes...and that...silence about it actually communicates a lot.

Teachers' fears of including LGBT people, real or fictional, in the curriculum, is supported by broader social discourses that construct children as too young to think about 'sex' (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Ferfolja, 2008).

Yet we all might do well to recall that heterosexuality involves sex as well; the difference is that we do not assume that stories that feature a mommy and a daddy focus on what they do together in bed. Many people have been scandalised by the sexual knowledge provided by stories such as *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Souza, 1989) and *Daddy's Roommate* (Willhoite, 1991), despite the fact that these same-sex couples are depicted throughout the books as engaged in the most mundane of activities (indeed, some might argue that these books are too boring!). This reaction has been particularly evident in our more recent participatory action research project (explained in detail below). Colleagues of our project teachers have worried that *Daddy's Roommate*, one of the books we have made available to schools, is too blatant in its depiction of an openly gay couple. As one researcher observed:

In my experience (*Daddy's Roommate*) is the most hated book of the pack teachers are using, and the most common comment made is that it is 'too much in your face' (I also realise that people think that there isn't much of a story, but the 'in your face' comment does tend to be the first reaction), and yet...what the two dads are doing is no more or less than what hetero couples are shown doing in other books.

Far more risqué images can be found in popular Disney movies. The passionate kisses between Belle (the beauty) and her beast, for example, and between Pocohantas and John Smith³ constitute much more sexually explicit images than, for example, the barely touching lips of two young princes in the book *King and King* (DeHaan & Nijland, 2002). Nevertheless, this chaste gay kiss is modestly obscured by a carefully placed heart. The skewed perceptions of explicit sexual content in gay and lesbian, but not straight, relationships illustrate the strong yet subtle influence of heteronormative assumptions.

In summary, our earlier research revealed some of the complex discursive processes that underpin heteronormativity within and beyond school spaces and supported other research that has sought to capture the subtle operation of heteronormativity. These include the definition of homosexuality (but not heterosexuality) in terms of sexual acts and a concurrent understanding of children as asexual and naive, despite the fact that many will undoubtedly have some personal experience with non-heterosexuality and gender variance through family and friends, and will undoubtedly be (mis) informed by popular media. These assumptions also include a belief that the normative is natural and essential rather than socially constructed and the conviction that sexuality is a private bodily issue that has no place in public, disembodied spaces such as schools. These popular discourses comprise a web of perceptions and histories that serve to support heteronormativity, but which also hold the potential to disrupt it. It is this potential that we have tried to exploit in the most recent, implementation phase of our research.

3. The *No Outsiders* project: practice-based research at the primary level

The final phase of our research was a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, *No Outsiders*, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-0095), that involved 26 primary teachers working throughout the UK to develop action research projects that addressed lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality in their own schools and classrooms (September 2006 to March 2009). Teachers worked in 3 regional research groups that were coordinated by researchers based at three universities (University of Sunderland, University of Exeter and the Institute of Education, University of London). To provide a forum for collaborative reflection, project members shared a project website, where data was shared with the rest of the team and analysed discursively through an ongoing virtual discussion forum. While university researchers participated in these analytical discussions, teachers were primarily responsible for designing the practices they explored and evaluated, taking into account both their own interests and strengths and the local contexts in which they were teaching. Many of these took the form of explicit inclusion of sexualities equality under the broader umbrella of equalities work in a variety of ways, such as rewriting school policy, diversity celebrations, and incorporating books

³ Still images can be found at <http://www.killermovies.com/forums/f90/t318873.html>. For a video compiling various Disney kisses, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtiolMa0xoY&feature=related>.

depicting non-heterosexual and non-gender-conforming characters throughout the curriculum.

It might be said that the work of all 26 teachers constituted separate projects, with the shared overall objective of ‘adding to the understanding of the operation of heteronormativity within primary school contexts and developing effective means of challenging this heteronormativity’ (as stated in the project proposal), and that the nature of local contexts and teachers’ own perspectives, values and resources shaped the particular strategies. But actually we would argue that it was more complex than that, and even project members began to talk about work that felt more or less ‘project-y’: some teachers implemented planned interventions with clear beginnings and endings and carefully designed activities, while other work seemed more like a relentless questioning and disturbing of the still waters that constitute heteronormativity. Sometimes frustrating encounters with seemingly insurmountable obstacles and setbacks proved themselves to be part of the data.

Because of an overall perception that people would expect a set of clear and reproducible lesson plans, there was some concern among the teachers that the work of those who were more disposed toward subtle, less tangible shifts toward “queering” primary practice and those whose more difficult local contexts made visible, coherent practice difficult would be less valued as research ‘output’. This vast range of teachers’ experiences, including lesson plans and reflections on classroom practice, is collected in a resource aimed at practitioners (*No Outsiders Project Team, 2010*), while some of the theoretical and methodological issues running through the project as a whole are analysed elsewhere (*DePalma and Atkinson, 2009a*). Some of the specific activities included, for example:

- A filmed dramatic adaptation of *King and King* (*DeHaan & Nijland, 2002*)
- An afterschool art club in which children explored and reclaimed through artistic (re)design oppressive symbols of Nazi Germany, including the Jewish star and the pink triangle.
- Inviting a lesbian foster caregiver to talk about foster families as part of a broader unit on family diversity.
- A maths exercise that involved stick figures that disrupted gendered assumptions, for example, a bow on the head was read by the children as appropriate only for girls, but was assigned to a figure with a typical boy’s name
- Development of a series of lesson plans around LGBT-inclusive books for children from nursery age through end of primary (12 years old)
- An arts-based workshop inviting children to consider how gender is socially constructed and constrained (*No Outsiders Project Team, 2010*).

The final research report, which can be found on the ESRC website⁴, lists some key considerations for carrying out similar work:

- Children were able to develop understandings of sexual orientation and gender variance by drawing on information gained from the media and by relating to friends’, family members’, and even their own experiences of exclusion for perceived sex/gender/sexuality transgressions. Contrary to some popular misconceptions, this does not require knowledge about the mechanics of sex.

- Literature and the creative and performing arts were found to be particularly powerful tools for drawing upon pupils’ and teachers’ imaginations to challenge accepted norms.
- Staff training that enables practitioners to explore unvoiced concerns and misconceptions that involves both teaching and non-teaching staff was found to be particularly effective.

4. A teaching case exploring oppression and resistance: the Eurovision unit

Many practitioner–researchers working on the *No Outsiders* project explored creative ways to link sexualities to other areas of inclusion which have already been firmly established in their school settings, such as race, ethnicity, social class and disability. This cross-equalities approach meant exploring relationships among different kinds of oppression and resistance and interrogated underlying social processes: What fuels prejudice? What motivates people to speak out or to hide their differences? When neo-Nazis made homophobic threats leading up to the Eurovision European song contest in Serbia (2008), one teacher turned this unfortunate development into an opportunity for exploring these issues. We have selected this particular example out of the diversity of approaches taken by *No Outsiders* teachers not because it is representative of some kind of ideal or average, but because it involves an analysis of both the institutional processes of oppression and the ways these play out on the inter-personal level in terms of silence, resistance, collusion, support, etc.

At the time of his participation in the *No Outsiders* project, Andy⁵ was an Advanced Skills Teacher in a school serving a largely working class community the Midlands region of England. As an out gay teacher who is both popular with children and widely respected by colleagues, Andy has explored some ways in which his own identity can be used to promote equality. In the first year of the project Andy focused on impromptu discussions with children where they attempted to reconcile the knowledge that their teacher is gay with less respectful understandings of gay people whom they have encountered in the broader community and the media (see *Atkinson & DePalma, 2009* for further details). In his second year of the *No Outsiders* project Andy designed a unit on oppression and resistance around *John Boyne’s The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006), a book depicting the unlikely friendship between the son of a concentration camp commander and a young Jewish boy who was interred in the same camp. The pupils were in Year 6 (ages 10–11).

He did not initially select the book as part of his *No Outsiders* work, nor did he initially plan to incorporate his own attendance at the Eurovision song contest. These ideas came later, as he gradually began to realise that he was drawing upon the *No Outsiders* principles that he had been discussing throughout his curriculum to clarify the issues raised by the book. He began this discussion on the project website by sharing these observations with the rest of the team:

I am using the language of *No Outsiders* all the time in the lessons, saying you were targeted for being different. The class is beginning to understand the significance of wearing an arm band and standing out, so that you cannot hide, and you are made to feel like an outsider.

⁵ As a practitioner–researcher, Andy has chosen to be referred to by his real name rather than a pseudonym. We were prevented by institutional anonymity requirements from fully revealing the identities of practitioners or schools (a situation which is more fully explored elsewhere (*DePalma, in press*)). Some teachers, however, including Andy, have chosen to publish aspects of their work, and in this case the anonymity restrictions do not apply.

⁴ <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/esrcinfocentre/viewawardpage.aspx?awardnumber=RES-062-23-0095>.

Despite these connections, Andy began to worry that children seemed to be having difficulty grasping the concept of oppression, and were tending to adopt a 'blame-the-victim' discourse. He brought these concerns to fellow *No Outsiders* teachers on the project discussion forum:

I'm reading *The boy in the striped pyjamas* to Y6 at the moment and they are finding it hard to understand why the Jewish people in the story are in the concentration camps – one boy said, 'They must have done something wrong' (24 April, 2008).

This initial interpretation is not surprising, given the victim discourses prevalent in broader society that can, as we suggested earlier, lead to victim-blaming solutions such as changing one's dress and mannerisms so as not to stand out (Broverman, 2008; Hill, 2004). Andy wanted to find an alternative way of conceptualizing oppression that would enable more a profound and meaningful analysis.

When neo-Nazi groups began to make public threats toward gay people leading up to the Eurovision song contest in Serbia, Andy shared with the team his idea to weave his own plans to attend this event into his teaching. Generally, the teachers supported this idea as sound practice, one pointing out that the book had been used in her school with great success, and another suggesting school can often be a sterile place that does not address the realities faced by some people. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of concern for Andy's safety in attending the event in the face of such threats, with some teachers suggesting that he might consider not attending this year (he was not swayed).

Shortly before he left for Serbia, he shared with his pupils some of the homophobic threats that had been made by modern day Nazis toward gay people attending Eurovision. He summarised these for us as follows:

The Serbian Nazis organization 'Obraz' has revealed that the 'Blood of homosexual people will be on streets of Belgrade during Eurovision'...They gave promise that they will attack every gay couple in Belgrade during the Eurovision Song Contest ... (web posting 24 April, 2008).

This led to a series of class discussions about the social processes of discrimination, threat and fear, both in the past and present. Andy reflected on the children's reactions:

Today I told the children about the gay bashing in Serbia. They were shocked and the class was split half and half on whether I should go. We had a wonderful discussion about the impact on LGBT people in Serbia if everyone stayed away, and I was able to link the comments made by the Nazis in Serbia today with those made by the Nazis in Germany in the 1930's. Look what happens if we don't challenge such views – that is why we say at [our school] there are no outsiders. (web posting 9 May, 2008).

Andy's own personal fears and hesitations about attending Eurovision as a gay man in the face of such threats to his personal safety were an important part of this lesson, as the children felt genuinely implicated in the age-old struggle between capitulation and resistance to oppression. As they offered suggestions about whether their teacher should succumb to the threats and stay home or go and support the Serbian LGBT community, they grappled with emotions that were complex and relevant. Andy shared with the rest of the team the ways in which he learned from his own fears:

I'm back from Belgrade and had a fantastic time, although I have never been so glad to get home from a Eurovision. There was a distinct threatening atmosphere in the city that got worse as the contest drew nearer. The first gay bashing incident that

people heard about was on Thursday night, and on Friday night there were two more including one man from Australia who was hospitalised. And these were just the ones we heard about. Then on the Saturday morning a newspaper ran a headline that was translated as "Devils ball" with a photo across the front page of two men kissing and three smaller photos of men kissing or dancing together. The text said something like "For Eurovision the devil comes to party in Belgrade"...This was a valuable experience for me as I am not often in a situation where I feel even walking down the street or getting on a bus with my partner is dangerous. One night (my partner) and I stood at a bus stop waiting for a bus back to the hotel and there weren't many people about. The first bus came, it wasn't ours and it was empty. Then a group of five or six 18 – 20 year old lads came to the bus stop and stood next to us. They were talking away and kept looking at us. (My partner) was saying I was being paranoid, which I probably was. But the thought of getting on an empty bus with this group was I thought just not worth the risk. So I said 'Let's get a taxi' and flagged one down. The chances are it would have been fine, but what if...?? (web posting 27 May, 2008)

His discussions with *No Outsiders* team members helped him to investigate the nature of his own reactions to the experience and to explore how a critical reflection on these might inform his teaching.

Andy's classroom discussions allowed them all, teacher and pupils, to consider what it might mean to give in to fears and become invisible in the face of persecution. These discussions also helped him to understand better how the pupils conceptualized the issues and to plan further steps based on the children's understandings:

When I got into school on Monday morning (there was an) interesting comment from (a child) who said I'd be okay because 'There's hardly any gay people, are there? And you're not going to wear a T-shirt with "I'm gay" on it, so the Nazis won't know who to attack, so they won't bother'. (This) demonstrates the need to show pictures of gay prides when we do this work so the kids realise there are lots of gay people and they come in all different shapes and sizes! (web posting 14 May, 2008)

Andy's reflections illustrate that he has used children's comments and perceptions (for example, the belief that there are 'hardly any gay people') to design further classroom activities based on these insights (such as photos of gay pride marches that illustrate the number and diversity of gay people). Andy's reflection was based not only on his own experiences and the discussions with children in his classroom, but also on the discussions he had with team members on the website as he was planning, implementing and reflecting on this classroom practice.

A particularly interesting feature of Andy's approach was that this was the first time that he had deliberately drawn attention to gay people as actual or potential victims. The majority of Andy's references to gay identity in the classroom were positive, and rested on his own openness as an out – and happy – gay man. Andy strategically used his own experience to problematize static understandings of oppressors (unusually nasty and powerful people, somehow apart from regular society) and victims (weak people, perhaps in part to blame for their own oppression) and highlight the ways in which everyday institutions and assumptions serve to make these relations possible.

5. Conclusion and implications for practice and policy

Investigating the nature of heteronormativity illustrates that anti-bullying policy is not enough, as reactive responses in the form of post-hoc punishment schemes and 'Zero Tolerance' policies do

little to address the sociocultural nature of discrimination and oppression. It may seem ironic that the violent death of a Black youth sparked a shift from an individual to an institutional understanding of racism in the UK, but this policy shift reflects recognition that taking a systemic approach is ultimately the best protection for individuals. This shift from an emphasis on protecting the safety of those who are different to an institutional recognition of systematic inequity is also reflected in the **Toronto District School Board's Equity Foundation Statement**:

The Board recognises however, that certain groups in our society are treated inequitably because of individual and systemic biases related to race, colour, culture, ethnicity, linguistic origin, disability, socio-economic class, age, ancestry, nationality, place of origin, religion, faith, sex, gender, sexual orientation, family status, and marital status. Similar biases have also impacted on Canada's aboriginal population. We also acknowledge that such biases exist within our school system (2000, p. 3).

Cultural assumptions and taboos about sexuality have prevented teachers from exploring non-heterosexuality and gender variance within educational contexts. Of course, sexuality does involve sex, but the narrow definition of sexuality as confined to (particular) sex acts does not help primary teachers see how sexuality can be a relevant or even permissible topic for young children. It might be more useful to broaden our notion of sexuality than to try and eliminate sex entirely from the equation. In the words of one of the few teachers we know who actively addresses sexualities equality as part of his planned curriculum (but who was not permitted by his school to join the *No Outsiders* project), 'Sexuality...doesn't simply revolve around sex but rather sexual identity, love, empathy, kinship and comfort: things we all need and search for. Sexuality brings about life and it makes life worth living. Sexuality affects us all' (Watkins, 2008, p. 116).

Failing to address this crucial area of equalities tends to ensure that everyone, regardless of their sexuality or gender identity, is restricted to the small range of gendered and sexual behaviours that serve to affirm normative (hetero)sexuality. In this sense, disrupting this heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) is a wider social justice project that broadens possibilities for all children. We must learn to ask how transgressions of sexuality and gender have come to be defined as such, by whom and to what effect.

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